

Fiction or Fictional Life Stories? Reading Qurratulain Hyder's *Beyond the Stars and Other Stories* against her Life Writings

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Abstract: *Sitaron se Aage (Beyond the Stars)* is Qurratulain Hyder's earliest collection of Urdu short stories, published in 1947. Hyder translated or transcreated much of her fiction into English but she didn't revisit this collection. It troubled me that since it was unavailable in English, Anglophone readers would never know about these youthful stories and so I decided to translate them. Now that sufficient biographical material is available on/by Qurratulain Hyder, I recognized in the process that several stories are in fact, autobiographical. Hyder was weaving fiction based on personal life experiences. The stories are set in places she grew up; institutions where she studied are centralized; activities she indulged in are incorporated as she reminisces her childhood and adolescence; her political and philosophical leanings become apparent. Significantly, she is present in several stories either as a character or as herself – a painter or a budding writer. One may also conjecture that this debut publication is her homage to her father. In this paper, I read the *Sitaron* . . . stories autobiographically based on Hyder's life writings, interviews and essays she has published, as well as films on her.

Keywords: Life writing, childhood, adolescence, youth, education, politics, music, painting

Qurratulain Hyder (January 1927 – August 2007) published her earliest collection of Urdu short stories *Sitaron se Aage (Beyond the Stars and Other Stories)* in 1947, just before migrating to Pakistan with her mother. Over time Hyder translated or transcreated most of her fiction. However, she did not revisit *Sitaron se Aage*. I decided to translate this collection with a view to bring it to Anglophone readers and to help develop a better understanding of this excellent writer and her art. Owing to the availability now, of sufficient life writings¹ I recognized that autobiographical and biographical elements are common to all the stories in *Sitaron*. This tendency to include biographical or autobiographical experiences or ephemera is common among writers across cultures but in *Sitaron*, several stories are fictionalized life stories and some are actually life stories. Young Hyder was weaving fiction around family, friends and acquaintances. She was employing stream of consciousness modes and/or interior monologues as veiling or masking devices. Written in all likelihood between 1944 and 1947, the stories are based on her personal experiences and set in places she grew up; institutions where she studied acquire prominence; activities she indulged in are incorporated and childhood and adolescent reminiscences become the stock material around which stories are spun. Hyder's comfortable way of life, reminiscent of a gone forever era and its many cultural allusions, her wealth of knowledge and her philosophical and socio-political orientations, though still nascent, are discernable. This paper reads *Beyond the Stars* . . . against Hyder's life writings to deliberate over her adolescence, relationships and friendships, education and learning, cultural and literary orientations and her evolving, political-cultural understanding.²

Hyder's father, Syed Sajjad Hyder 'Yildirim' (1880 – 1943) was a poet, essayist and playwright, a popular and prolific short-story writer. Her mother Nazar Sajjad Hyder (1892 – 1967) was a reputed novelist and short story writer. Educated, emancipated, liberal and modern, she championed women's causes and actively worked for reform. She participated in the non-cooperation movement, gave up purdah in 1920 and projected women like herself in her oeuvre. She served as honorary editor of the children's magazine *Phool*, published in Lahore. Hyder grew up in an illustrious, intellectually stimulating, erudite and anglicised but culturally rooted familial setup, where women's education and progress were matters of course. Regarding her Chacha Naseeruddin Hyder's family she writes that his wife, her Chachi, Waheeda Begum was fluent in English. Their daughters Azra, Zehra and Khalida or Achcho were brilliant students through school and college. They received graduate and post-graduate degrees with first-class from Aligarh, took up diploma courses at Lady Irwin College, Delhi, and Khalida went on to study abroad. Their sons Zaheer (Achche Mian) and Salahuddin (Pare Mian) were outstanding students who did exceedingly well for themselves (*Kaf-e Gul* 110).³ More generally Hyder writes: "My convent educated female cousins read Jane Austen and Dickens. Young men quoted Karl Marx. A youthful family friend became one of the founder members of the Progressive Movement" ("Novel and Short Story": 208–209). The women in *Beyond the Stars*, drawn from among her cousins, relatives and friends, epitomise emancipated, modern, liberal, sophisticated and enlightened women who exercise agency in deciding the course of their lives. They are self-assured, accomplished, well-informed and politically conscious. They enjoy reading, painting, outdoor and indoor games, sports, music and dance, and evening outings; education is a way of life and professional qualification provides an edge. While several of them are quintessentially conservative, eager to marry and settle down to comfortable lifestyles, many more are contemporary, seek economic independence, contribute to the nationalist struggle for independence and try to affect positive changes in their environment.

Hyder is present in several stories either as a character or as herself, Ainie or Miss Hyder. Hyder was known as Ainie Apa or Ainie Khala or simply Ainie among friends, acquaintances and relatives. At home she was also called Bibi. Her presence among women of various dispositions as a painter, as a music and dance enthusiast and a budding writer, corroborates the autobiographical nature of these stories. As a character, she values reason over emotion, balks at young men who fawn over her and scorns young women who fall helplessly in love. In several contemplative, inward-looking stories Hyder writes about her anxieties as a young writer trying to find her feet or forge a style. In "A Worthless Office" for instance, she muses "*But Ainie, has it ever occurred to you that you always talk about the same old things – in other words, only about disillusionment?*" (72). In "We, the People" she jocularly disparages herself: "Now, I've started writing short stories and in every story, I find it essential to mention a Studebaker or a Packard" (92). In other stories she is concerned about individualism as a writer's pre-requisite; is comfortable in the thought that she writes differently from others, and is somewhat complacent that her career as a writer is bourgeoning. This is particularly significant because *tarraqi-pasand* or progressive trends were dominant in Urdu during this time. The *Anjuman Tarraqi Pasand Mussamifin-e Hind* or All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA), Marxist-socialist in orientation, held its first meeting in Lucknow in 1936. The ensuing movement took Urdu literature by storm. The decade from 1937 to 1947 was of most abundant progressive literary output in almost all Indian languages. Hyder did not align with the Progressives, despite her awareness of all this. Several stories in *Beyond the Stars* feature activities of the Marxists and Hyder's own inability to conform to their political ideals. In "A Worthless Office" the protagonist is keenly conscious that Communist Party representatives face bleak and uncertain futures (83–84). In "I Hear there was an Alchemist in the Heavens"

one of the characters makes flippant, tongue-in-cheek remarks about a socialist cousin (38-39); “Stray Thoughts” has Hyder avow commitment to her bourgeois sensibility (115) and “The Gomti Flows On” contains lighthearted references to Progressive literature (169). The title story “Beyond the Stars” a narrative from the point of view of comrade Hamida, portrays a group of disillusioned Communist Party workers who keep up their spirits by singing, smoking, sleeping or reflecting *en route* a humdrum bullock-cart journey.

Hyder received much flak from the Progressives for expressing bourgeoisie sensibilities in the occasional stories in published in literary magazines, for *Sitaron se Aage, Mere bhi Sanamkhane* (1949; Maktaba Jadeed, Lahore) or *My Temples, Too* and *Sheeshe ke Ghar* (Glass Houses, 1954) her second collection of short stories. Ismat Chughtai’s essay “Pompom Darling” criticising her themes, characters and sensibility was unforgiving and disparaging. Hyder was heartbroken. “So quite unwittingly I became a controversial writer” (Preface xiii) she writes. And again:

I was first called a giggly schoolgirl, and then a bourgeoisie reactionary. I found it all very unfair and saddening. It was hard to explain what ingredients had gone into the creation of those stories and that first novel of mine. They were not the world’s best fiction but when I re-read them now I realize that they were certainly different. Perhaps all that I felt and perceived had to be expressed differently....The style comes with the theme and the environment. (“Novel and Short Story” 209)

Nevertheless, despite the controversies that raged around her, she stood her ground. Her relationship with the Progressives remained tenuous. Much later, she cited Iqbal to express her awkward position in relation to them: “*Khudawanda ye tere sada-dil bande kidhar jaaen*” (“God, where may your simple beings go?”) (*Shahra-e Hareer* 318).

In “The Caravan Rested Here” a section of which is essentially autobiographical, Hyder writes that her family “laughed heartily” when she put away her brushes and began writing and adds that she had to defend herself staunchly before them:

“Uffo, just think— Bibi’s well-known outside the household as a story-writer!” And there was always such a din at the dining table “Now look at this — *Saqi* and *Adab-e Latif’s Exquisite Literature* editors have written, asking for pieces for their annual issue.” This was greeted with such hilarity that I wanted to cry! (160)

She adds that one evening when she announced that her stories were going to be published, nobody believed her. In fact, one of her Bhaijan’s⁴ friends remarked with absolute seriousness:

“Make sure you publish a detailed explanation along with them, so people can understand what you’ve written!” (160)

Several stories feature an amateur painter. “The Caravan Rested Here” gives indication retrospectively about Hyder’s sense of the natural environment in Port Blair:

What a riot of colours there was! The dark blue and green sea; golden sands; grey cliffs; our kothis’ red roofs, green clusters of coconut palms; orange sunlight reflected on waves that swept the shores; white seabirds and the white sails of our boats — there was colour all around us! Were I old enough, I would capture them on my canvas. As far as the eye could see, sunlight washed across brightly-hued poppies, like the rising of bright flames.

In “The Deodar Forest”, the narrator paints nature under the deodars; in “A Worthless Office” Farida paints and her sister Asma is a writer; in “An Evening in Avadh” Zeenat cannot understand why the narrator paints instead of engaging in more worthwhile activities (122). As a young girl, Hyder enjoyed painting casually. She recalls how, much to her embarrassment, her mother showed her paintings to Syed Mohammad Oyama, the Indian-Japanese painter who visited them in Dehradun, and also sent her to learn painting informally with their neighbours. Hyder joined evening painting classes in the Arts School

with a friend, Premlata Grover, under the tutelage of L.M. Sen for a few months while studying for her MA in Lucknow. She couldn't continue the course because they were supposed to visit the University library around the same time. Striding two courses was difficult (*Andaz* 134-135).

Hyder had a good idea of war-time exigencies and contingencies. Her maternal grandfather Khan Bahadur Nazrul Baqar was a supply agent to the British Indian Army. He was in China during the Boxer rebellion, in South Africa during the Boer War, Burma during the Lushai War and spent four years in France during the First World War (Preface xii). On his return at the end of the war he was felicitated by the British government with a title and a jagir which he refused, reasoning that he had no use of it since his only son, the school-going Syed Mustafa Baqar had succumbed to cholera in Lucknow in 1916, while he was away at war (*Kaf-e Gul* 35). Young Hyder felt sensitively about the changes the Second World War wrought in her own country and the world at large. She writes:

The impact of World War II further changed the social landscape. During my college years I began writing about it all. I didn't tell my parents and the stuff began to appear in major literary magazines. ("Novel and Short Story" 209)

Almost all the stories in *Sitaron se Aage* centre World War II overtly or laterally. Though only "I hear there was an Alchemist in the Heavens" describes war-front action in Germany, albeit in flashback mode, Hyder explores various aspects of the War – warfront deaths, destruction, disabilities, frustrations, deferrals of personal plans, enlisting, volunteering with the Red Cross and nursing wounded soldiers. Victory celebrations, lit up Hazratganj roads, thanksgiving service, the La Martiniere College boys' parade are all fictional representations of real-life events ("The Dance" 110). Most often, war thoughts or scenes are expressed in interior monologues. Hyder's protagonists, subconsciously aware of the War, express war-thoughts monologically, making the distant seem near and the past impinge upon the present.

Hyder's family and Muhammad Iqbal shared a close relationship. She narrates about Iqbal's travelling to Lucknow to condole the untimely death of her maternal uncle Mustafa Baqar and staying with them at their Hilton Lane residence. She writes half-humorously that Iqbal mistook a severe stomach infection he contracted after a sumptuous dinner hosted in his honour by the Raja of Mahmudabad, for cholera and was beside himself with worry. He was treated by the resident civil surgeon Colonel Birdwood who resided at Abbott Road and a Hakeem from Jhawai Tola. When he recovered, the Raja booked him a first-class ticket and arranged two attendants to wait on him on the return journey to Lahore. She adds that her father accompanied him too (*Kar-e Jahan* 220-222). In "The Caravan", Hyder writes, "I sat up with Abbajan till late at night, discussing Iqbal's poetry and a host of other worldly matters (161)." That these deliberations had palpable and long-lasting effects is evident in *Beyond the Stars* and her subsequent work. Several stories make direct or oblique references to Iqbal. In "Ah! O Friend," an intensely subjective and inward-looking story, essentially a recollection of miscellaneous thoughts, of people, places, events, activities and interests, conceived in stream of conscious mode, she recalls, in all likelihood, her father's exhortations to read Iqbal's *Asrar-e-Khudi* (*Secrets of the Self*) and *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi* (*Secrets of Selflessness*). "... immerse yourself in Iqbal, your understanding will improve a great deal..." (69) he advises. In "A Worthless Office" she incorporates Iqbal's couplet to propose a new world order:

Reduce to cinders this borrowed earth and sky
And from its ashes create your own universe (74)

She borrows the first line of his couplet from the ghazal 'Mohobbat' ("Adoration") from *Baang-e Dara* (1924; *The Call of the Marching Bell*):

*Suna hai aalam-e-bala men koi keemiyagar tha
Safa thi jis ki khak-e pa men barh kar saghar-e jam se* (Iqbal 189)

I hear there was an alchemist in the Heavens

The dust of whose feet sparkled more than Jamshed's crystal globe (my translation)

to serve as the title of a story and quotes sections of the ghazal in it. Over and above, she titles her collection *Sitaron se Aage*, after a story bearing the same title. "*Sitaron se aage*" is the opening phrase of a ghazal from *Baal-e Jibril* (1935; *Gabriel's Wing*), a collection of poems composed mostly during Iqbal's student years in Europe.

*Sitaron se aage jahan aur bhi hain
Abhi Ishq ke imtihan aur bhi hain* (Iqbal 640)⁵

There are other worlds beyond the stars,
yet other trials of love.

Several times she refers to the *Murraqqa-e Chughtai* (Chughtai's album) a selection of Ghalib's couplets, illustrated in Mughal and calligraphic style by Abdur Rahman Chughtai. Iqbal wrote the Foreword to the album and commended Chughtai's unique style.

Hyder writes about her adolescence and youth among friends, relatives and acquaintances, albeit imaginatively. Several stories contribute to the bioscope of memory of leisurely years in Port Blair, Dehradun, Lahore and Lucknow. Hyder spent her early childhood in Port Blair where her father was posted as Assistant Revenue Commissioner on the Andaman Islands. "The Caravan Rested Here" cherishes memories of these halcyon, sunny days among sights and sounds that afford pleasure. Hyder describes the "kothi".

...pretty, two-storeyed, Japanese style wooden buildings with red thatched roofs made with wood from the green jungles all around. On the lower level lived the guards who stood vigil over the kothi. Above the portico was the drawing-room with big windows facing the sea – all approaching ships could be seen from our windows. At night, far away on the horizon, the beam from the lighthouse glimmered.... At the bottom of our garden's slope, hidden behind a cluster of coconut palms, was Mr Jaspal's kothi. (157)

Interwoven are happy memories of a carefree childhood spent in the company of friends. Hyder recalls that Mr Jaspal's children, she and her brother, Nilofar and her two elder sisters, and the chief commissioner's daughter, Aizmee were the only children on the island. They played and fought all day long; swam, gathered sea-shells or made sand-castles in the evening and studied geometry and grammar at night. She adds that when her Abbajan and Uncle Jaspal were away at office and they were expected to study with their tutors, against our will, the telephone would be under siege! All manner of pranks were played on the unsuspecting tutors. Bedtime was at 8 pm, but Saturday and Sunday nights were gala nights because their parents were away at the Nicobar Island Club and returned rather late. As a safety measure the girls were all gathered together and Shakuntala or Aizmee took charge of them. They enjoyed themselves thoroughly, played hide and seek in dark rooms, in corridors or under stairways and sang so loudly that the piano's strings nearly cracked. Like all little girls she and Kamla and Vimla believed the world of their elder brothers who were studying at Colonel Brown's in Dehradun, across the sea. They all felt thrilled when the young men came home during summer or Christmas vacations (156-158). The story also stands testimony to friendships that withstood both the passage of time and distance. Hyder recalls that in India, she, Shakuntala, Vimla, and Kamla went to school at the convent in Dehradun.⁶ After retirement, her Abbajan took up residence in Lucknow⁷ with a view to providing for the children's first-rate education. Soon, Uncle Jaspal was transferred to Lucknow from Allahabad, and all the girls joined college, and then the University, and began attending their classes. As young women, Hyder writes, "we were very firm of mind" (160). She is full of admiration for her friends

who won accolades in academics and co-curricular activities at university and trained in dance at Uday Shankar's dance centre. Mr Balwant Singh Jaspal, closely connected with the royal family of Kapurthala, and Hyder's father were professional colleagues and good friends. Syed Sajjad Hyder took charge from him as Assistant Revenue Collector on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Their children kept up their friendship over the years in Dehradun and Lucknow. According to Hyder, Mrs Balwant Singh's Guru Mata predicted that Shakuntala would marry a Muslim. She married Anwar Jamal Kidwai. (*Kaf-e Gul* 94 and 127). Hyder writes that Kamla was brilliant and she looked up to her as a "guru" (*Zindagi-nama* 32). Years later, in the Preface to *The sound of Falling Leaves*, an essay recording stray childhood remembrances, Hyder writes:

One of my earliest memories is that of myself perched on shoulder of a Goan steward on the deck of *S S Maharajah*. We were on our way to the Andaman Islands. Port Blair is less hazy. A sprawling bungalow on stilts, Burmese and Punjabi servants, a private fire-engine downstairs. A sentry at the gate shouting from time to time *Haalt hukum sadar* which was the Urduised form of "Halt who comes there?" Father was assistant revenue commissioner of the islands where the notorious Cellular Jail had originally been set up for the rebels of the "Sepoy Mutiny". (v-vi)

In an interview for BBC Urdu, Hyder informs that they lived in the Andaman Islands for one year. She recalls that the ambience was "*pucca colonial*." Their domestic staff comprised convicts serving life term. Her father took a transfer because potable water was scarce and there wasn't any scope for education for her brother. From Port Blair the family moved to Ghazipur where the ambience was very East India Company. Life here was carefree; she read much and also began her readings in Urdu.

Hyder received preliminary, formal education in English schools in Dehradun, Aligarh, Lahore, and mostly in Lucknow, training in art and music at the same time. Since her father was on a transferable post, intermittently, she studied at home where she also read the Quran and studied Urdu under the tutelage of Maulvis. Hyder writes about her earliest experiences with a maulvi in "The Caravan":

We didn't know any Urdu at all. Abbajan was worried that (...) I'd turn out to be like an Anglo-Indian. Therefore many preparations were made to send for a red-bearded Maulvi Sahib from Calcutta, and I was issued an ultimatum: if I played any pranks on him I'd be held by my ears and packed off to Aligarh. This was such a powerful threat that I busied myself studying Urdu grammar and the Persian *Amadnama*. (157- 158)

Beyond the Stars deals with the relevance of knowing Urdu well or not knowing it well enough. In "A worthless Office" Hyder muses that her Urdu is weak because she always studied in convent schools and needs English expressions to overcome is deficiency (74-75). In "The Dance of a Spark" both Lalarukh and Kamaal concede that their Urdu is weak: "(Actually, I cannot speak good Urdu)... (What a pity! My Urdu isn't any better.)" (97); and in "I Hear there was an Alchemist in the Heavens" there is jousting between Sabiha and Asif about correct placement of the adverbial in a sentence (39).

Hyder took her High School examination from Banaras Hindu University. She cleared her Intermediate examination in 1941 from Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow and went on to get her BA degree from Indraprastha College, Delhi in 1945. She took an M A degree in English, from the University of Lucknow in 1947. Her readings in Urdu, Persian and English literature in her father's well-stocked library contributed largely to her literary consciousness and shaped her imagination. Through these years she studied classical music both formally at the Banaras Hindu University and Marris Music College and informally at home. Like her mother she played the sitar. She also studied western classical music at Isabella Thoburn College and learnt to play the piano. In Baker School, London she further honed her skill and continued to pursue her interest in Pakistan under

the guidance of a private tutor. Hyder's entire family had a keen interest in music and several cousins were fond of singing, her Bade Abba included. Her parents encouraged her to study music and her mother desired Muslim women to study music with a view to reform (*Andaz* 161-162). She employed resident ustads who taught her to play the sitar.⁸ Some of Hyder's earliest memories include those of resident or visiting ustads who taught her mother and her cousins the sitar and/or the sarod. "Dalanwalla" narrates how studying music and dance became preoccupations not only in her household but the entire neighbourhood (38). Music and dance, both Indian and Western, particularly fusion music and fusion dance are instrumental to several stories in *Beyond the Stars*. For instance, in "Ah! O Friend", Hyder recalls Uday Shankar, his fusion of Indian and Western dance, his perfection and his India Cultural Centre near Almora which had to be shut down for want of funds; his wife Amla and their international acclaim. She recalls Ram Gopal and his success as a fusion dancer and his foray with films. Perhaps at the back of her mind are fond childhood memories of visits to Becket House, her Chacha Naseeruddin's residence in Almora, and of learning music and dance.

In "The Gomti Flows On", a transcreated, non-fiction account, possibly a rewriting of "Lekin Gomti Behti Rahi", a story in *Sitaron se Aage*, Hyder recalls that during the monsoon season soon after schools and colleges reopened, along with a few girls of "traditional as well as modern families of both communities" she learnt to play the tanpura in a school in an old mansion in Lal Bagh, run by a sightless "utterly old-world courteous, Kayastha Master Saheb", a graduate from Marris Music College (Bhatkande University) and his wife. She adds "...as I strummed the *tanpura*, Shakuntala Mathur started a *Malhaar – Mohammad Shah piya sada rangile – un bin jiya tarse. Rom jhom badarva barse...*" (*The Taj Magazine* 4-5). Hyder's depiction and the raga and are a replication of a portrayal in "We the people" in which the rains pour and Shakuntala Varshney sings a *Malhaar – Mohammad Shah piya sada*(93).

Isabella Thoburn College is a pulsating presence in several stories. Memories of college life are evoked repeatedly. The principles and values it promoted are imprinted on her young, impressionable mind indelibly; she is fascinated by its impressive building with its imposing Grecian pillars and it is quite evident that she has enjoyed her tenure there wholeheartedly. As a student who believed unreservedly in the eminence of her institution, Hyder very likely felt like a kindred spirit to all that it stood for. "The Gomti Flows On" centralizes life in Isabella Thoburn's Nishat hostel and includes a reference to Miss Sarah Chakko who was appointed professor at the college in 1943 and went on to become the principal.¹⁰ The reader is introduced to a world of young men and women, the narrator's cousins and friends of diverse ethnic, cultural and political sensibilities, pursuing various careers. Misunderstandings and scandals are part and parcel of their lives. "Mona Lisa" reflects on the mysteries of life and pays homage to Hyder's years at Isabella Thoburn. In all likelihood, Hyder is looking back at these "exciting" years with a sense of nostalgic longing when she writes:

"Superb, my dear children, our rehearsal is doing fabulously!" said our French music teacher as she smiled a contented smile and walked out to stand in the imposing pillars' lengthening shadows on the veranda. Nishat closed the piano with similar composure. How exciting was life! Strains of 'La Boheme' echoed in the fading light and all around us our college's great buildings were gradually disappearing in the evening's darkness. *My dear college, one of the best colleges in Asia, an American college in Asia!* (135-136)

A mature Hyder reiterates that Isabella Thoburn College "was the finest college for girls in the entire East" (*The Taj Magazine* 5). The river Gomti, Qaisarbagh Baradari, Mayfair, Hazrat Ganj, University of Lucknow, the two La Martinere Colleges, India Coffee House, Moti Mahal Bridge, Hardinge Bridge and various monumental buildings – places of

bustling activity, festivity, gossip and scandal are central to Hyder's memory of growing up years and the cityscape of Lucknow.

Nostalgia and yearning for a time past, or days gone by haunt a few stories. There is in them a certain sadness stemming from, one presumes, the demise of her father who she loved dearly and who stood at the focal centre of her existence. His presence in absentia is perceivable in these. Perhaps, *Sitaron se Aage* is Hyder's homage to him. "Abbajan was my best friend!" she says in "The Caravan Rested Here" (161). In "Ah! O Friend" she is nostalgic about music lessons, dance practice and about happier days in Lucknow, Nainital, Almora and Mussoorie. In all likelihood her "friend" is her father. Very likely, this story was written while she was reading for her BA in Delhi. "The Deodar Forest" begins nostalgically with the protagonist reminiscing the past in juxtaposition with the present:

We still have our evening tea under the branches of the pear and apricot trees, bent low with heavily laden fruit, but I do not pluck apricots when Ammi isn't looking any more. In the valley below, the 9 o'clock train still meanders like it did before, but I no longer dart on an impulse to bid the travellers goodnight when I hear it approach, and nor do I feel the urge to run along and count the lights – these are all old, meaningless things now. (1)

"The Deodar Forest" and "Ah! O Friend" were first published in *Saqi*, the former in August, 1944 and the latter in April 1945. In all likelihood, they were written after her father's demise. Much had changed for the Hyderys by then. Hyder enjoyed warm relationships with her cousins, particularly her Chacha Naseeruddin's daughters. Khalida who was closest her age is in all likelihood, a major character in "The Deodar Forest". Going by the fact that the story is set in Dehradun, the landscape is similar to that of Dalanwalla where the Hyderys lived in a neighbourhood housing predominantly English residents and upper crust Indians;¹¹ it is narrated in the first person, by a narrator who is an amateur painter and the cousins are by themselves at home, one of them is studying home science at Lady Irwin College, a reader familiar with Hyder's life writings cannot help assuming that the story or elements of the story are autobiographical. Khalida catches a severe cold in the story. Hyder writes that as young girls, she and Khalida were prone to catching colds and both underwent tonsil surgeries under the supervision of their Chacha Waheeduddin (*Kar-e Jahan* 321). She also writes that their parents often travelled up and down Itawah, Nehtaur, Aligarh, Shahjahanpur and Dehradun by road or train, leaving the girls in the care of older cousins or relatives (*Kar-e Jahan* 322-323). This fact is featured in the story also.

Hyder celebrates the Yeatsian country house ideal where comfortable living is a way of life, and ordinary, everyday matters like evening tea or breakfast are ceremonious affairs, where want and deprivation are unknown, though not unheard. Like Yeats who expresses a strong sense of belonging to family, ancestry culture and even the materiality of the house and the comfort it affords in his poems (Reid 331), Hyder exhibits a strong affiliation to her familial background, her lineage and privileges that came with a well-heeled ancestry. Most of the stories in *Beyond the Stars* testify to this. Young men and women in Hyder's stories enjoy comfortable Anglicized lifestyles, tête-à-têtes over coffee, tea parties and music and dance; they dance the fox-trot, rumba, Lambeth-walk with as much zest as they do classical Indian dance. They delight in Hollywood films and revel in the glamour, charm and sophistication of Hollywood actors. Their interests are in fact, Hyder's own. Home is always a space that provides comfort, a space she celebrates as a place of belonging. In all likelihood, the young narrator of "Stray Thoughts" (113-115) who enjoys the warm coziness of a fire in her drawing-room hearth, sipping flavorful, aromatic coffee is Hyder. The narrator refers to her Chacha Mian who was away at the Viceregal Lodge attending a party and his son, selected for the Imperial Service, who introduces her to a young Marxist painter. Hyder's Chacha Khan Bahadur Syed Waheeduddin Hyder was a civil surgeon at

Shahjahanpur (1935) appointed honorary physician to Lord Willington and Lord Linlithgow (*Kaf-e Gul* 64 & 72). Chacha Mian in the story is very likely her own Chacha.

With regard to her early stories Hyder writes:

My take-off point was atmosphere – time, the twilight of the Raj. I began writing about a particular ethos – landed and service gentry, hill stations, neo-Georgian houses and dak bungalows in remote districts old feudal homes in rural areas and small towns. (“Novel and Short Story” 208)

Hyder didn't travel far to look for any of these. As regards the houses her protagonists occupy, one may assume that they are her own Ashiana in Dalanwalla, Baldeo in Mussoorie, 21 Faizabad Road in Lucknow; Beckett House in Almora; her Chacha Waheeduddin's residence in Shahjahanpur and houses in the neighbourhoods of Dalanwalla and Lucknow. Unselfconsciously Hyder upholds syncretic ideals and celebrates hybridity in all the stories – ideals she imbibed while growing up in a culturally liberal environment, ideals that her family valued and which were strengthened in the neighbourhood peopled by well-to-do Indians, Englishmen and Anglo-Indians, in Dehradun during her childhood. Muslims and Hindus co-existed with graceful camaraderie and unselfconscious acceptance of one another. There was carol singing to the accompaniment of the accordion and guitar at Christmas time (“Dalanwalla” 67). In Lucknow, Isabella Thoburn strengthened her syncretic sensibilities. Several stories, predominantly “After the Flight”, “Star-Crossed” and “Mona Lisa” feature mass, pealing church bells, Christmas singing and celebrations. Several feature young Anglo-Indian girls or elderly British or European women and their modes of livelihood during the last years of the Raj – Mrs Lorenzo who teaches music, Mrs Chapman who runs a hotel, Madame Volga who teaches dance and Pittman's typing institute are drawn from British pensioners' families in the neighbourhood (“Dalanwalla” 45-52) and stand testimony to the “twilight of the Raj”. Verdant greenery, luxuriantly forested hillsides, conifers and fragrant flora provide perspective to Hackman's Hotel, the Savoy, Rajpur Road, Odeon Cinema, Saint Joseph's Academy and the skating rink, all much-loved sights and sounds of Dehradun and Mussoorie.

The stories in *Beyond the Stars* are located in personal, everyday experiences and set against the then-current social, political and cultural ambience. Owing to the extent of autobiographical and biographical borrowings several of them can be classified as fictional life stories. Young Hyder's casual acceptance of a shared cultural heritage stems from an upbringing sans communal prejudices. It matured into an urgency with which she upheld syncretic sensibilities and offered self-critiques to run-down zealotry and separatism. As a writer affecting large readerships, she felt committed to promoting ideals of harmonious co-existence. Her engagement with World War I evolved into a life-long commitment to foreground exigencies of politically perpetrated catastrophes on ordinary lives. Her oeuvre gives precedence to art and culture, expressing that through them alone can man, caught in a bevy of cataclysms, find fulfilment. Her new-fangled narrative styles, uncommon in Urdu literature, were meant perhaps, to mask subjective sensibilities or generate a semblance of dissociation. Over the years as the range of Hyder's themes expanded, she gradually gave these up in preference for realistic modes. Located in real-life matters and apprehensions, *Beyond the Stars* provides glimpses into Hyder's adolescence and youth; it is also a preamble to concerns she elucidated in her oeuvre.

Notes

- ¹ Hyder's last writing project, her family saga *Kar-e Jahan Daraz Hai* (*The Task in this World is Endless*) running into three volumes, is an autobiography / biography of sorts, latitudinally expansive, elaborate and digressive. She published letters and a two-volume, comprehensively annotated photo album *Kaf-e Gul Farosh* (*Palm of the flower-seller*). In addition a number of interviews add to our understanding of Qurratulain Hyder, her craft and her philosophies.
- ² I have touched upon some of these issues in my Introduction to *Beyond the Stars*....
- ³ These cousins feature in *Sitaron se Aage*. Achcho was her friend, philosopher and guide (*Zindagi-nama* 17).
- ⁴ Her elder brother Syed Mustafa Hyder, who she addressed as Bhaijan or Bhai.
- ⁵ Iqbal's couplets have been transliterated from Urdu.
- ⁶ "Dalanwalla", an account based on recall, delineating her childhood days in Dehradun includes accounts of their friendship.
- ⁷ The Hyder family lived in bungalow 21, on Faizabad Road. "The Caravan" includes a reference to the house (156). In *Kaf-e Gul Farosh* Hyder publishes a photograph of the house taken in 1968, and informs that it remained their residence till her father's death in 1943 (102).
- ⁸ *Kaf-e Gul Farosh* includes photographs of Nazar Hyder playing the instrument (67-68).
- ⁹ Suraj Baksh Srivastava (*Andaz*162).
- ¹⁰ Hyder's reference to her indicates that she kept up with the goings-on at her college even after passing out.
- ¹¹ Their residence, 3-Ashiana, Dalanwalla stood near Eastern Canal Road. Adjoining the house were Mango and Litchi orchards. A hill nallah hurtled nearby (*Kar-e Jahan* 327). The railway tracks lay close by.

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